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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a general overview of Aztec education as it existed when the Spanish arrived in 1519. A brief history traces the rise of the Aztecs from lower-class squatters and mercenaries in the Valley of Mexico to the rulers of a loosely structured "empire" consisting of some 15 million people. Aztec society was highly stratified, but higher rank carried with it higher expectations of moral responsibility and correct conduct. The foundations of society were a religion that ensured the continued existence of the cosmos through the shedding of human blood, and warfare that provided both the blood of warriors and sacrificial victims. Aztec education aimed to promote socially appropriate behavior and instill core values such as self-control and courage in the face of death. Young children learned their parents' daily tasks, learned to tolerate hunger and discomfort, and were punished for inappropriate behavior. At ages 12-15, both boys and girls attended a formal school maintained by their kinship group, where they received religious and cultural education. From ages 15 to 20, the sons of commoners engaged in extensive military training; received instruction in history, religion, ritual, proper behavior, and music; and learned vocational skills from their fathers. The sons of the nobility attended temple schools, where they received an academically superior education, memorized vast quantities of historical and religious material, and learned to speak well. There were also instances of girls and non-noble boys attending temple schools to become scribes or priests. In short, Aztec education for young adolescents was mandatory, universal, and quite successful in achieving its aims. (SV)

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Developing "Face and Heart" in the Time of the Fifth Sun:

An Examination of Aztec Education

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Developing "Face and Heart" in the Time of the Fifth Sun:

An Examination of Aztec Education

Prologue

This paper, which presents a broad overview of Aztec education as it had developed up to the time of the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico in 1519, is actually part of a much larger project. This larger project focuses on the educational thought and practices of a variety of non-western civilizations, past and present, around the world (see, e.g., Reagan, 1992). Although such indigenous approaches to education have been dramatically diminished in terms of both status and significance as colonial and post-colonial educational systems, modeled on and closely related to, those of the former colonizing powers, have gained ascendancy, they nonetheless merit serious academic consideration, study and attention. Many aspects of these diverse educational traditions are interesting and intriguing in their own right, but even more, by studing such traditions we may be able to gain further insight into the complex nexus of social, cultural, political and economic factors as these factors are reflected in social institutions of education.

Introduction

When Hernán Cortés and his men first arrived in Mexico in 1519, they were astounded by the civilization that greeted them. Unlike earlier contacts between Europeans and indigenous peoples in the western hemisphere, in their introduction to the Aztec civilization,[1] Cortés and his followers faced a highly sophisticated, urban culture in full flower -- a civilization, in fact, that in many ways compared favorably to that of any sixteenth century European society. As Cortés himself wrote to the Spanish king,

> . . . these people live like those in Spain, and in as much harmony and order as there, and considering that they are barbarous and so far from the knowledge of God and cut off from all civilized nations, it is truly remarkable to see what they have achieved in all things. (Quoted in Hassig, 1985, p.4)

This was remarkably high praise from the man who was, more than any other single individual, responsible for the destruction of the Aztec world -- or, as the Aztecs themselves would have termed it, the "time of the fifth sun."[2]

Education, both formal and informal, was an important and well-developed part of Aztec society (see Campos, 1936, pp. 65-72; Infante, 1983; Markus, 1963). As Miguel León-Portilla has commented,

> The written sources on the educational practices of the Nahuas are so abundant that a book could be written on that subject alone. Such a book might reconstruct -- as did Jaeger's ***Paideia*** for the ancient Greeks -- through the educational system all the richness and profundity of the Nahuatl concept of man. (León-Portilla, 1963, p. 135)

And yet, despite its noteworthy successes, no mention whatever of the educational thought and practice of the Aztecs appears in the standard works in the history of education in the English-speaking world. While a thorough analysis of education in the "time of the fifth sun" is far beyond the scope of this paper, what is possible is to present a general overview of Aztec education as it existed at the time of the arrival of the Spanish in the early sixteenth century.

The Aztec World: An Overview

The Aztecs were relative latecomers to the Valley of Mexico, building their society on the cultural, religious and intellectual foundations, as well as on the architectural ruins, of earlier civilizations, especially that of the Toltecs (see Soustelle, 1970; Townsend, 1992, pp. 44-50). Further, their rise to prominence was, in the words of Muriel Weaver, "a dramatic rags-to-riches tale" (Weaver, 1981, p. 420). The Aztecs first arrived in the area of the Valley of Mexico in the early thirteenth century, by which time the more desirable areas around the lake shore were already settled by other Nahuatl- and Otomí-speaking peoples, as well as by the descendants of earlier refugees from Teotihuacán and Tula, amongst others (see Davies, 1982, pp. 167-171; Thompson, 1933, pp. 23-27; Weaver, 1981, p. 420). Indeed, the awareness of their late arrival, as well as of their status as outsiders, remained with the Aztecs until the arrival of the Spanish. Cortés himself recorded that Monteuczoma, in their first conversation together, commented that:

> From the records which we have long possessed and which are handed down from our ancestors, it is known that no one, neither I nor the others who inhabit the land of Anahuac, are native to it. We are strangers and we came from far outer parts. (Quoted in Brundage, 1972, p. 22)

The new arrivals were not greeted with open arms by those already settled in the area, and in the early years after their arrival in the Valley of Mexico, the Aztecs were driven from one area to another around the western part of the lake. As Jon Manchip White has written,

> . . . they were looked upon as little more than squatters . . . Nor was it simply the case that they were backward and brutish: they were downright squalid. Their little uncouth tribal war-god, Huitzilopochtli, was already notorious for the number of fresh, bleeding hearts he required, and his worshippers did not seem to be particular about where they got them. They gained a reputation for every kind of murder and brutality. (White, 1971, p. 93)

Finally, the Aztecs arrived at Culhuacan, one of the established cities in the Valley. The Culhua permitted the Aztecs to settle at Tizapan, about six miles west of Culhuacan, in an inhospitable area where they fully expected that the Aztecs would, "perish . . . eaten by the serpents, since many dwell in that place" (quoted in Fagan, 1984, pp. 57-58). Instead, the Aztecs prospered, ultimately acquiring not only access to the cultural heritage of the Toltecs, but also to claims of Toltec lineage as a result of intermarriage with the inhabitants of Culhuacan. The Aztecs also became mercenaries for the Culhua, and were so successful in this role that they eventually came to represent a serious threat to their former masters. The tensions between the Culhua and the Aztecs were forced to a head when the Aztecs requested:

> . . . the hand of one of Culhuacan's rulers, a beautiful girl whom they promptly killed and flayed. Her father arrived to attend her wedding, only to be confronted by a priest dancing in her flayed skin. Fighting broke out at once, and the [Aztecs] retreated into the swamps of the lagoon, finally reaching the safety of a reed-covered island near the center of what is now Mexico City. There they rested. Huitzilopochtli [the Aztec war god] appeared before one of the priests, ordering him to search for a cactus where a great eagle perched. This, said the god, was a place he had named Tenochtitlán, the "Place of the Fruit of the Prickly Pear Cactus." (Fagan, 1984, p. 58)

Thus, according to Aztec legend, was Tenochtitlán, the capital city of the Aztec Empire, established, probably around 1345 (see Davies, 1982, p. 171; Weaver, 1981, p. 421). The Aztecs now experienced a period of growth and consolidation, culminating in the defeat of the city of Azcapotzalco in 1428, which "established the Aztecs as the dominant power in the Basin of Mexico" (Weaver, 1981, p. 422). By the time of the arrival of Cortés and his men, the Aztec Empire was in many ways at its height,[3] consisting of some fifteen million people and 489 tributary towns, which were in turn divided into thirty-eight provinces for administrative purposes (Bray, 1968, p. 25). It was in actuality not so much an "empire" as it was a loose collection of culturally related but distinct principalities sharing, for the most, a common

language[4] and united primarily by the paying of tribute to Tenochtitlán (see Berdan, 1976; Clendinnen, 1991, pp. 25-28; Hassig, 1985, pp. 276-280). Under the Aztecs, local rulers continued to govern their communities, albeit under the auspices of the Aztecs. Characteristic of the Aztec approach to imperium was its emphasis on control of urban centers:

> Because of the nature of Mesoamerican warfare and the limitations on political consolidation, conquest did not mean complete territorial control. Rather, conquest was of political centers. Control of territory per se was not a major consideration. Once a political center was dominated, so too were its dependencies, and tribute, flowing from dependency to cabecera to provincial capital, could be drained from an entire region simply by dominating the center. (Hassig, 1985, p. 104)

The Empire was held together, in short, not by the establishment of military garrisons throughout its territories, nor by overt control from Tenochtitlán, but rather, by tribute to be paid to Tenochtitlán and well-developed commercial ties (see Weaver, 1981, pp. 451-455; see also Hassig, 1985). The paying of tribute as well as the commercial ties were both, in turn, strengthened by what might be termed "ideological hegemony," as Hassig has noted:

> . . . the Aztecs' reliance on hegemonic rather than territorial control produced an empire of distinctive character and vast expanse but loose control. Mesoamerican technological constraints limited the size, strength and duration of forays outside the empire, and such engagements took on strategic characteristics that varied with the political nature of the target. Furthermore, the Aztec Empire was essentially an alliance, and was expectedly fraught with rebellion. Nevertheless, the system functioned admirably within its cultural context, and through it the Aztecs expanded their domain to a size unprecedented in Mesoamerica. (Hassig, 1988, p. 26; see also Hassig, 1985, pp. 92-103)

By 1519, Tenochtitlán was a large, thriving urban metropolis of some 200,000 people, with at least as many living in the satellite cities that surrounded it, making it far larger than any European city of time (Fagan, 1984, p. 109; Bray, 1968, p. 98). The city was connected to the mainland by three elevated causeways, and was provided fresh water by a serious of carefully engineered aqueducts (see Bray, 1968, p. 98). Food came to the capital not only as tribute from the provinces, but also, and more importantly, from the ***chinampas***, the island-gardens that made possible the intensive agricultural cultivation that supported the urban civilizations of the Valley of Mexico (see Fagan, 1984, pp. 84-89).

The spiritual heart of the Aztec Empire was the Templo Mayor, the largest structure in the central plaza of Tenochtitlán (see Fagan, 1984, pp. 99-103, Boone, 1987), which represented not only the ritualistic center of the Empire, but even more, in its architecture itself was the embodiment of the Aztec view of the universe, as Eduardo Matos Moctezuma has noted:

> The Templo Mayor thus becomes the fundamental center where all sacred power is concentrated and where all the levels intersect. I propose that it not only occupies a privileged location but that in its architecture, form, and particular characteristics it also represents the entire Mexica conception of the cosmos. (Moctezuma, 1987, p. 191)

Aztec society was hierarchical in nature, characterized by rank and kinship (Nicholson, 1967; Fagan, 1984, pp. 137-138; Katz, 1966, pp. 123-149; Chase & Chase, 1992; Davies, 1987, pp. 106-116). The population was broadly divided into those of noble birth and those of common birth, although some degree of social mobility did exist -- primarily as a result of success in commerce, military success, or entrance into the priesthood (Hassig, 1988, p. 28). Gender also played a key role in individual identity in Aztec society (see Hellbrom, 1967; Kellogg, 1988), as did ethnicity for those of non-Aztec ancestry. Central to social status in Aztec society, though, was military rank:

> Military ranking was intimately tied to the overall social structure of Aztec society, and social ranking was intimately tide to political offices, the latter defining rights and requiring the holder to have a specified status. (Hassig, 1988, p. 28)

It is interesting to note that while, as Nicholson (1967, p. 64) has noted, "the sharply aristocratic bias of the society as a whole, naturally correlated with a high degree of social stratification," this social stratification was manifested in practice by far greater expectations of those at higher social levels. For example, as Muriel Weaver has argued,

> An interesting concept of Aztec law was that the severity of punishment was measured in accordance with the offender's station in life. A high priest would be put to death for a crime that might be tolerated if committed by a bondsman. That is, a man of high office assumed greater moral responsibilities and his conduct was expected to be beyond reproach. (Weaver, 1981, p. 446)

Also important in terms of the organization of Aztec society was the role played by the ***calpulli***, the ancient territorial kinship groups to which every member of the society belonged (see Soustelle, 1961,

pp. 7-8). The ***calpulli*** "served as the interface between the citizens and the government" (Fagan, 1984, p. 146; see also Davies, 1973, pp. 81-83), as well as maintaining religious and educational institutions and communally holding a certain amount of land (see Katz, 1966, pp. 117-121). As Fagan has commented,

> The ***calpulli*** was probably the most important social institution in Aztec society. It provided a mechanism by which people cooperated with one another and gave a large measure of security to everyone. The state used it not only to govern a teeming and diverse urban and rural population, but to recruit large numbers of people at short notice for public works or armies of conquest. (Fagan, 1984, p. 148)

Underlying virtually all aspects of Aztec society were the two closely interrelated pillars of Aztec society, militarism and religion (see Carrasco, 1990, pp. 45-50; Klein, 1987; Brundage, 1972, pp. 96-102; White, 1971, pp. 113-115). For the Aztecs, warfare was a means not only of gaining personal glory, social status, and, ultimately, tribute and expanding territorial control, but even more, a kind of sacrificial activity. In fact, warfare involved two kinds of sacrifice, as one of the terms used by the Aztecs to refer to war makes clear: ***teoatl tlachinolli***, which literally translates as "divine liquid and ashes" (Brundage, 1972, p. 97). The term itself incorporates a vast wealth of meaning:

> The first element signifies "blood," and the second is a shorthand statement for the practice of cremating dead warriors on the battlefield, a Toltec custom that released the fortunate soul like a sunburst to ascend into the heavens. War meant the spilling of human blood, which was by definition a liquor destined for the support of the gods; war, in other words, was an act of sacrifice carried out voluntarily by those who killed as well as by those who were killed. (Brundage, 1972, p. 97)

Indeed, the need for such sacrifice was so great that when real warfare was not possible or advisable, the Aztecs engaged in what was called a ***xochiyaoyotl***, or "war of flowers" (Brundage, 1972, pp. 99-101; see also Carrasco, 1990, p. 49; Tannahill, 1992, pp. 304-306). The ***xochiyaoyotl*** was a ritual military contest, "in which the two sides set out to capture the maximum number of sacrificial victims from the other while inflicting a minimum of damage in other respects" (Davies, 1987, p. 93; see also Conrad & Demarest, 1984, pp. 58-60; Hassig, 1992, pp. 147-148).

Sacrifice was essential in the Aztec religious system, since it was the shedding of human blood that ensured "the continued existence of the cosmos" (Carrasco, 1990, pp. 85-88; Fagan, 1984, p. 228).

The sun itself, as well as the other deities of the Aztec pantheon, were nourished by human blood (Bray, 1968, pp. 171-175). As Davies has suggested,

> In general terms, the religion of the Aztecs was an elaborate defence mechanism, born not out of hope but of anxiety. Every aspect, and in particular human offering, implies a struggle to ward off disaster, whether immediate catastrophes such as crop failure or the ultimate doom of the Fifth, and last, Sun. (Davies, 1982, pp. 229-230)

Such an understanding is also consistent with the Aztec view of history, as León-Portilla has noted:

> It was believed that the present sun, moon, stars and earth integrate the fifth universe within a series of ages, known to the Nahua people as "Suns." Four other Suns had emerged and come to an end through the machinations of the gods: the ages of Earth, Air, Water, and Fire. The present is that of ***Olintonatiuh***, "The Sun of Movement," which began to exist and to move thanks to a primeval sacrifice of the gods, who, with their own blood, brought it into being and thus also gave life to a new generation of humans. This fifth age not only may perish but actually carries within itself the very principle of death and destruction. (León-Portilla, 1992b, p. 46)

Another view of the role of sacrifice in Aztec religious thought is that offered by López Austin, who has:

> . . . claimed that the relationship between god and man was mercantilistic: man gave blood, hearts, and fire to the gods, and was given in return crops, water, and freedom from disease and plagues. This claim is supported etymologically. The word for sacrifice to the gods is ***nextlahualiztli*** ("the act of payment"), and the offering of fire to the gods, ***tlenamaca***, means "to sell fire." (Ortiz de Montellano, 1990, p. 41)

Such sacrifice occurred, of course, not only on the battlefield, but in the temples and in everyday life as well. The role of human sacrifice, and the related practice of ritual cannibalism, in Aztec society has been well documented (see Brundage, 1972, pp. 101-107; Davies, 1982, pp. 228-231; Fagan, 1984, pp. 228-237; Othón de Mendizábal, 1971; White, 1971, pp. 119-121), and it is clear that such sacrifice involved both males and females, adults and children (see Brundage, 1979, pp. 212-214; Davies, 1987; Fagan, 1984, p. 232; León-Portilla, 1958), and as many as twenty thousand human sacrifices a year may have taken place by the time of the arrival of Cortés (Brundage, 1979, p. 215; Fagan, 1984, p. 230; see also Davies, 1987, pp. 218-221, for a description of the inflationary nature of human sacrifice in Aztec society). Also important in Aztec life, though, was the practice of autosacrifice, which involved personal bloodletting.

As Cecelia Klein has argued, "In Aztec society, from all reports, virtually everyone, regardless of age, sex, or social class, was expected to bleed himself" (1987, p. 350). The practice of such autosacrifice, which the Aztecs believed to have originated with the god Quetzalcoatl, was in fact closely related to human sacrifice, and it appears to have served as a symbolic substitute for human sacrifice in some instances (see Klein, 1987, p. 297).

Aztec religious thought entailed far more than just sacrifice, of course. Religion played a central role in social life in general, touching every aspect of the society (see Bray, 1968, pp. 152-185; Weaver, 1981, pp. 446-451). In addition to the rituals performed in the temples, their religion provided the Aztecs with a well developed creation mythology, a powerful moral code, the basis for their political and economic social order, a complex view of life after death, a priesthood responsible for the maintenance of both the oral and written traditions of their society, the calendrical system used not only to maintain records but to make predictions, a highly developed astrological system, and the foundations for a metaphysical and ultimately philosophical worldview (see Edmonson, 1988; Elzey, 1976; Keen, 1971, pp. 30-48; León-Portilla, 1958, 1963, 1966; Lhuillier, 1963). Thus, it is hardly surprising that religious concerns are in many ways at the heart of the Aztec notion of the "educated person," the concept to which we now turn.

The Aztec Conception of the "Educated Person"

The development of the individual's personality, which the Aztecs called "face and heart," played an important role in their conception of education and the "educated person," although the primary focus of education was "the assimilation of individuals into the life and highest ideals of the community" (León-Portilla, 1963, p. 135). As one ancient text described what we would today call the "educated person":

> The mature man
> is a heart solid as a rock,
> is a wise face.
> Possessor of a face, possessor of a heart,
> he is able and understanding. (Quoted in León-Portilla, 1963, p. 141)

The core values that were expected to guide the behavior of all individuals in Aztec society, regardless of social station, and which provide a clear indication of the Aztec view of what the "educated person" might look like, include:

(1) maintenance of control and discipline;

(2) fluency of speech and good manners;

(3) a composed and reserved attitude;

(4) a sense of responsibility for the common people;

(5) respect for one's elders;

(6) interest in and knowledge of the gods; and

(7) courage, submission to one's fate, a desire to die a heroic death rather than to die without having made a serious effort to expand and strengthen the Aztec's supremacy. (van Zantwijk, 1985, pp. 170-171)

These core values are clearly intended to promote the general good of society, and have a social rather than individual focus, as one would expect. This focus can be seen vividly in the following model homily delivered by an Aztec father to his son:

> Revere and greet your elders; console the poor and the afflicted with good works and words . . . Follow not the madmen who honour neither father nor mother; for they are like animals, for they neither take nor hear advice . . . Do not mock the old, the sick, the maimed, or one who has sinned. Do not insult or abhor them, but abase yourself before God and fear lest the same befall you . . . Do not set a bad example, or speak indiscreetly, or interrupt the speech of another. If someone does not speak well or coherently, see that you do not the same; if it is not your business to speak, be silent. If you are asked something, reply soberly and without affectation or flattery or prejudice to others, and your speech will be well regarded . . . Wherever you go, walk with a peaceful air, and do not make wry faces or improper gestures. (Quoted in Davies, 1982, p. 240)

The purpose of Aztec education, in short, was largely to promote socially appropriate behavior, and in this objective, it is clear that Aztec education was remarkably successful (see Infante, 1983; Soustelle, 1961, pp. 167-174). As the Jesuit José de Acosta noted in the latter part of the sixteenth century,

> Nothing caused me so much admiration and seems to me more worthy of praise and remembering than the care and discipline with which the Mexicans raised their children. In effect, it would be quite difficult to find a nation which in its times of paganism gave more attention to this element of highest importance to the state. (Quoted in León-Portilla, 1963, p. 135)

We turn now to an examination of how the Aztecs accomplished the making of such "educated persons," first looking at the child's earliest years at home, and then at the formal educational institutions of Aztec society.

The Educational Functions of the Family in Aztec Society

As Fagan has commented, "From the moment of birth, an Aztec child became aware that the world was a place of hard work and suffering" (1984, pp. 149-150). Early childhood education for the Aztecs was guided by the twin concerns of teaching self-control and accommodation to adversity on the one hand and self-knowledge and introspection on the other (see León-Portilla, 1963, p. 136). By the age of four, both boys and girls were performing chores around the home; boys began by carrying water and accompanying their fathers to work and the market, girls by helping their mothers in various household activities (Bray, 1968, pp. 58-59). The nature of the activities in which children were engaged became increasingly sophisticated as they grew older and were given more responsibility; for girls, such training was intended to prepare them for their futures as wives and mothers, while for boys, the focus was increasingly on learning their father's craft (Fagan, 1984, p. 151). Children also learned the importance of learning to control their appetites during this early period -- a lesson reinforced by the relatively small food ration they were allowed (León-Portilla, 1963, p. 136; Soustelle, 1961, pp. 167-168). Boys learned to tolerate not only hunger, but also extremes of heat and cold, as preparation for their later lives as warriors (see Campos, 1936, pp. 65-66).

Much of the concern of parents for their children during this early period in their children's upbringing concerned what might be called "character education," with punishments for inappropriate behavior ranging from mere scolding to beatings, being pricked with maguey spines, and, perhaps as a

last result, being forced to inhale the fumes of burning chillis -- punishments vividly portrayed in the Aztec manuscript the ***Codex Mendoza*** (see Ross, 1978).

Formal Schooling in Aztec Society

The first taste of formal schooling outside of the home that most Aztec children had took place between the ages of twelve and fifteen, when both boys and girls attended the ***cuicacalli*** ("the House of Song") (Fagan, 1984, pp. 151-153; Sahagun, 1981, pp. 165-166; Siméon, 1963, p. 120). Each ***calpulli*** maintained its own ***cuicacalli***, in which the elderly members of the community taught the songs, dances and music with which everyone in Aztec society needed to be familiar. The ***cuicacalli*** took place toward the end of the day, about an hour before sunset, and children learned:

> . . . the correct songs and orations for every major religious ceremony on the Aztec calendar. These incantations spoke of the Aztec cosmos, the creation, and the great migrations of the ancestors. They dealt with the roles of mortals on earth, and of the relationships between gods and humans. At the ***cuicacalli*** everyone learned about their cultural heritage and about the mystical and highly symbolic world that surrounded them. (Fagan, 1984, p. 153)

For the sons of the common people, additional schooling normally took place in the ***telpochcalli*** (the "House of Youth"), in which the curriculum included the study of history, religion, ritual, proper behavior, and music, singing and dancing (Bray, 1968, p. 63; Infante, 1983, pp. 57-63). The ***telpochcalli***, however, was primarily concerned with preparing their charges for war, and the students in the ***telpochcalli*** engaged in extensive military training and even participation in real battles on occasion (see Hassig, 1988, pp. 30-37). As Hassig has explained,

> Beyond greater numbers, the Aztecs also had a fully professional corps of soldiers, the result of a formal educational system. Initially, the Aztecs offered formal military training only to the elite, but within two decades of their emergence as an independent power, King Monteuczomah Ilhuicamina instituted training for all males . . . The commoners' schools [the ***telpochcalli***], located in each of the city's wards, were responsible for educating all the youths therein between the ages of fifteen and twenty years . . . each commoners' school had a staff of accomplished veteran soldiers who trained the youths in military skills. Youths . . . accompanied the army on its campaigns to teach them about battle, usually as burden bearers. (Hassig, 1992, p. 142)

Boys slept at the ***telpochcalli*** at night, and were required to perform a variety of different kinds of physical work necessary to the maintenance of the ***telpochcalli***, but they ate their meals at home with their families, and spent part of their day with the fathers, continuing to learn the vocational skills they would someday need to support themselves (Bray, 1968, pp. 62-63; Fagan, 1984, p. 154; Sahagun, 1981, pp. 163-166; van Zantwijk, 1985, p. 144).

The sons of the nobility, on the other hand, generally attended the ***calmécac***, which were attached to the temples and were under the direct control of the religious authorities (Bray, 1968, p. 63; Calnek, 1988). The ***calmécac*** provided an academically superior education, focusing not only on the military skills needed by all Aztec males, but also on religious instruction, history, painting, music, law, astrology, mathematics, government, and architecture (see Bray, 1968, p. 64; Infante, 1983, pp. 63-71). Also important in a ***calmécac*** education was learning to speak well; the Aztecs valued the ability the use what they called ***qualli tlatolli*** ("good language"), by which they meant noble, as opposed to common, speech, and even distinguished between ***macehuallatolli*** ("the language of the common people") and ***tecpillatolli*** ("lordly language") (León-Portilla, 1963, p. 140).

Since the Aztec writing system was "not a transliteration of spoken words but an elaborate code that was reserved to those who had learned its intricacies and the orations behind it," (Fagan, 1984, p. 198; see also León-Portilla, 1992a, pp. 69-70, 1992b, pp. 5-15; Marcus, 1992) students at the ***calmécac*** spent much of their time memorizing vast quantities of historical and religious material. This limitation of the Aztec literary tradition has turned out to have significant benefits for us today as we try to understand more fully the Aztecs, as John Cornyn has noted:

> The great body of the national literature was memorized in the Aztec schools over a period of scholastic life that was almost as long as our own. To this fact we owe the preservation of the very considerable body of Aztec metric compositions which have come down to us, for, had the Aztecs been able to write their literature, it would all have disappeared in the ruthless destruction of Indian libraries wrought by the Spanish conquerors and their native allies in the first few years after the conquest. (Cornyn, 1930, pp. 9-10)

Unlike in the ***telpochcalli***, students in the ***calmécac*** lived at the school, in what has been suggested to have been an environment "more like that of a monastery than an ordinary school" (Bray, 1968, p. 64). It was from the ***calmécac*** that the priests and scribes of Aztec society were drawn, as well as the senior government officials, military leaders, judges, and so on. Interestingly, while the patron god of the ***telpochcalli*** was Tezcatlipoca, the war god, the patron god of the ***calmécac*** was Quetzalcoatl, the Creator god who was also "the god of learning and culture, of ancient lore, the god of civilization itself" (Fagan, 1984, p. 244).

While attendance at the ***telpochcalli*** and the ***calmécac*** was largely determined by social class background, there was nevertheless a certain degree of choice involved in the selection of the school one's son would attend (Calnek, 1988). It is well established that children of non-noble backgrounds attended the ***calmécac***, primarily to become priests, just as it is documented that some children of the nobility attended the ***telpochcalli*** (see Calnek, 1988; Hassig, 1988, p. 34; León-Portilla, 1963, pp. 137-138, 1992a, pp. 142-144). In any event, all young men in Aztec society, regardless of their social background, attended one or the other of these institutions (León-Portilla, 1963, p. 138).

While all boys went on for further schooling, the ***cuicacalli*** was the end of formal schooling for many, and perhaps most, girls. There were, though, equivalent institutions available for upper class girls (see Bray, 1968, p. 64; Clendinnen, 1991, pp. 155-156; Infante, 1983, pp. 71-74), as we read about in the "Bancroft Dialogues":

> Likewise within the houses, where the ladies were in their quarters, the girls were taught all the different things women do: sweeping, sprinkling, preparing food, making beverages, grinding (maize), preparing tortillas, making tamales, all the different things customarily done among women; also (the art of) the spindle and the weaver's reed and various kinds of embroidery; also dyeing, how rabbit down or rabbit fur was dyed different colors. And in the same way (as with the boys) those who did something wrong or did not take care were severely punished. And they were all well cared for: no men, no matter who, entered there; taking care of them was the exclusive domain of the elderly noblewomen . . . And the commoners were raised in the same way; the youths were raised in the school at the youths' house, and the girls at the women's temple, where the female penitents were enclosed and fasted. (Quoted in Karttunen & Lockhart, 1987, pp. 153-155)

It is interesting to note here that while the norm in Aztec society was clearly on gender-specific education, on rare occasions women did in fact succeed in gaining entrance into at least some "male" professions. For instance, although virtually all Mesoamerican descriptions and illustrations of scribes presume this group to be male, the ***Codex Telleriano-Remensis*** provides an indication -- and, indeed, an illustration -- of a young woman who served as a scribe for the Aztec ruler Huitzilihuitl (see Marcus, 1992, p. 49).

In short, there is good reason to believe that formal schooling in Aztec society was well developed and effective. Perhaps most impressive was the fact that at a time when schooling of any sort was limited to a small elite in virtually every European society, in the Aztec world mandatory, universal schooling, for both boys and girls, and regardless of social class, was an established fact. Further, for the Aztecs "education" entailed a variety of different attributes; in fact, the Aztecs had two very distinct words for "education": ***neixtlamachiliztli*** ("the act of giving wisdom to the face") and ***tlacahuapahualiztli*** ("the art of strengthening or bringing up men") (León-Portilla, 1963, pp. 134-135). An obvious point of comparison is to Spartan education (see Markus, 1963), of course, though one might just as well note the similarities to other highly stratified social orders. In any event, given the model of "education" and the "educated person" presumed by the Aztecs, it would seem that the Aztecs were quite successful in achieving their educational aims.

Notes

1. There is something of a terminological problem involved in discussing the Aztecs. First, as Fagan has quite correctly noted, "At the time of the Spanish Conquest, the Aztecs called themselves either Tenocha Mexica of Tlatelolca Mexica, depending on which part of the capital they lived in. 'Mexica' could also be used alone, depending on the context" (1984, p. x). Furthermore, the Aztecs were but one group among the closely related Nahuatl groups in Mesoamerica, and so one might also quite properly use the term "Nahuatl" to refer to them -- as, indeed, Miguel León-Portilla does. However, "Aztec" is the most commonly and easily understood term used today for the people about whom I am writing, and so I have chosen to take the easiest way out for the benefit of the reader, as have many other writers on the Aztecs.

2. From the Aztec perspective, of course, the "time of the fifth sun" did not actually end with the Spanish Conquest -- technically speaking, only the end of the world as we know it, on a predetermined date, would constitute the end of the "time of the fifth sun." However, in a very real social and political sense, the world of the Aztecs did indeed end in the early sixteenth century, as Brundage (1979) and others seem to implicitly recognize in utilizing the phrase, "the fifth sun," to refer solely to the world of the Aztecs.

3. Although in many ways the Aztec Empire was indeed at its height in 1519, in other ways it was profoundly troubled. As Benjamin Keen has noted, "Was Aztec society going through a moral crisis, a ***crise de conscience***, on the eve of the Conquest? Certainly the native chronicles reveal a state of jangled nerves, of profound insecurity on the part of the Aztec leadership. Economic and social factors undoubtedly contributed to this state of affairs: chronic discontent of conquered peoples under the mounting burden of tribute demands, perhaps population pressure on exhausted soils, dissension between warrior nobles and increasingly powerful merchants, a decline of tribal solidarity as a result of growing inequalities of wealth and status. Yet ideological factors also played their part . . . Aztec civilization has reached an impasse that perhaps could have been overcome only by a decisive advance in technology, of the kind that attended the invention of ironworking in the Old World" (Keen, 1971, pp. 47-48).

4. Throughout Mesoamerica, Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs and related peoples, functioned as a lingua franca (see Andrews, 1975; Suárez, 1983).

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